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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: "OPERATION RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM" NETS BAPTISTS,
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS

REF: Astana 654

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¶1. (U) Summary: From February 12-21, law enforcement services in the Northern Kazakhstan Oblast conducted a preventative sweep entitled "Operation Religious Extremism," purportedly as part of a CIS-wide program to combat terrorism and violent extremism. Authorities detained the leaders of eight Christian groups for operating without the mandatory legal registration. No terrorists or violent extremists were detected during the operation. End summary.

THE OPERATION

¶2. (U) From February 12-21, law enforcement authorities in the Northern Kazakhstan oblast swept the region looking for religious groups and individuals operating in violation of the law. According to press reports, the police conducted a press briefing to announce that "Operation Religious Extremism" had resulted in the arrest of several leaders of Christian groups, primarily Baptists, for violating Kazakhstani law requiring the registration of religious groups.

¶3. (SBU) Post contacted a number of government authorities, including the Ministry of Interior (MVD) and the Religious Issues Committee (RIC) of the Ministry of Justice, in order to verify the press reports. An MVD representative claimed little knowledge of the operation, though she acknowledged it existed and stated that it was being coordinated through Moscow as part of a CIS-wide program to combat religious extremism.

¶4. (SBU) Amanbek Mukhashov, deputy chairman of the RIC, was initially unaware of the operation, though he followed up Post's inquiry with an internal report detailing the results of the operation. According to the document, "Operation Religious Extremism" is a coordinated and comprehensive operation aimed at the prevention and detection of terrorist attacks and other extremist actions. The program is part of the "2005-2007 Program of Cooperation of CIS Member-States in Combat against Terrorism and Violent Extremism." The law enforcement action in the Northern Kazakhstan oblast was Kazakhstan's first action under the program (Note: As detailed in the annual Human Rights Report and International Religious Freedom Report, Kazakhstani authorities regularly detain and fine the leaders of unregistered Baptist groups, many of whom refuse to register as a matter of principle. However, Post is unaware of a previous, broadly-coordinated law enforcement campaign against such groups. End note.)

THE RESULTS

15. (SBU) According to press reports and the document provided by the RIC, authorities took action against eight unregistered religious groups during the sweep. The press reports and confirming document reveal no violent tendencies or terrorist links among the groups.

16. (U) On February 14, police detained 43-year-old Evangelical Christian Baptist pastor Alexander Kerker in the northern Kazakhstan town of Taiynsha. His group was not registered, and he did not have legal documents permitting him to preach. The RIC document reports that law enforcement officers have repeatedly spoken to the pastor and explained his registration obligations under the law, though he consistently refused to comply. The authorities submitted evidence of the violation to the Taiynsha city administrative court. The court imposed a fine in the amount of 109,200 tenge (\$873) under article 374-1 of the Administrative Code entitled "Running or participating in an unregistered organization."

17. (U) The second unregistered group was the Grace Church in Iakor village, Kyzyl-zhar district in northern Kazakhstan. Police detained its leader, 42-year-old Yevgeniy Semerenko, on February 17. He did not have any documents to support his group, such as a charter or registration certificate, though he had practiced his faith for six years. The police press service stated that he held religious devotions and services at his mother's house. Materials on this group were forwarded to the Kyzyl-zhar district administrative court.

18. (U) On February 17, in the Kishkene-kol village, Ualikhanov district in northern Kazakhstan, Evangelical Christian Baptist pastor R. Pugachov was detained by police during a church service. The basis for the detention was once again that the group was not registered and the pastor did not have permission to preach. The same day materials on his case were filed with the Ualikhanov district administrative court. He was fined 109,200 tenge (\$873)

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under article 374-1 of the Administrative Code entitled "Running or participating in an unregistered organization."

19. (U) On February 19, the police detained the leader of a small group of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Lubov Furdakova, in the Kyzyl-zhar district. She practiced her religion in her house. Furdakova's group was not registered, although she claims she filed registration documents with the local office of the Ministry of Justice. Police forwarded materials on her case to the Kyzyl-zhar administrative court.

110. (U) Also on February 19, the police targeted the "Transformation" Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Nalobino village in the same Kyzyl-zhar district in northern Kazakhstan, detaining 64-year-old pastor Vasiliy Hotko. Hotko is a resident of Petropavlovsk, though he comes to Nalobino village regularly to hold services for the Pentecostal Baptists congregation. The group has a prayer house in Nalobino village, but police claim that they do not have a charter and are not formally allowed to operate in Kyzyl-zhar district. Police forwarded materials on this group to the Kyzyl-zhar district administrative court.

111. (U) On February 20, the leader of New Life Church, Ludmila Poltavtseva, was detained in Mamlutsky district in northern Kazakhstan. Though the group has a church building in Mamlutka, it does not have registration documents, and Poltavtseva does not have legal permission to preach. Materials were forwarded to the local court.

112. (U) On February 20, police detained the leader of Grace Church, Oleg Voropayev, in the Mamlutsky district. The group does not have a charter, and is not registered. Materials were forwarded to the local court.

113. (U) Finally, on February 21, the leader of the Church of Great Martyr and Healer Panteleimon, Ali Ismagilov, was detained in

Voskresenka village in the Mamlutsky district for conducting religious activities without registration. Materials were forwarded to the local court. (Note: This church is affiliated with the Orthodox faith. End note.)

MORE TO COME?

¶14. (U) Post was unable to learn further details of the operation or whether the government will continue such sweeps in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, Operation Religious Extremism is consistent with recent indications that some in the government seek to tighten control over unregistered and/or minority religious groups. On September 15, 2006, deputy chief commander of the KNB Counter-terrorism Center Askar Amerkhanov stated in a press interview that the KNB was drafting legislative proposals to address so-called destructive sects and organizations. Amerkhanov named the Grace Church, Scientologists, and Jehovah's Witnesses as organizations that should be banned in Kazakhstan. More recently, the RIC revealed that it is preparing draft amendments to Kazakhstan's religion law that would tighten government control over the registration process and significantly restrict the activities of groups with less than 50 members (reftel).

¶15. (U) In mid-December 2006, the "Megapolis" weekly newspaper published interviews with a representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan and a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan. Both clergymen supported banning Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Ahmadi Muslims, Hare Krishnas, Tabligi Jamaat, White Brothers, and Satan's Church from Kazakhstan. They favored tightening Kazakhstan's policy against non-traditional religions and welcomed draft amendments to prevent destructive sects and strengthen the privileged status of the two major faiths - Islam and Orthodox Christianity.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) It is puzzling that the police chose to trumpet the results of an anti-extremism operation that netted only unregistered religious groups with no evident ties to extremism. It is highly unlikely that Northern Kazakhstan oblast is actually devoid of extremist groups; rather, it appears that this type of law enforcement operation is simply not an effective way to detect groups that actually pose a risk to Kazakhstan's security. This operation, the pending draft amendments to the religion law, and the comments of the KNB counter-terrorism official point to a growing

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tendency to define as extreme any group that runs afoul of registration laws or falls outside of mainstream Kazakhstani culture and society. Post will continue to monitor the actions of law enforcement officials and encourage the Kazakhstani government to uphold its oft-stated commitment to religious freedom. End comment.

ORDWAY